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VIEW FROM THE DOUBLE DECKER

For Rs50, one can get as far on a local bus as Rs80 will get you on the Peoples' Bus Service. But on the latter, you don't have to contend with bad hygiene, pickpockets and overcrowding

FOOTPRINTS

By Hamza Azeem in Karachi

GETTING around Karachi without a car — or at least a bike — is not for the faint of heart. Options are limited; from ride-sharing apps with eye-watering fares to rickshaws that will leave you with a persistent itch in the back of your throat. And then, there are the buses.

Until recently, taking a bus in Karachi meant embarking on a battered hull adorned with kaleidoscopic patterns that emitted plumes of acrid black smoke — some of which makes its way into lungs of hapless passengers.

This is why the city's new double-decker buses, which launched on Jan 1, are a breath of fresh air. The Sindh government had announced the initiative in Oct 2024, and on Sunday, it came to fruition.

The towering red buses are an unfamiliar sight – being the hallmark of cities like London and Hong Kong – on Sharea Faisal, but they've only been in regular service for three days. Intrigued and always up to try a new mode of transportation, I caught one of the red giants from Press Club Chowrangi — known best for its proximity to Zainab Market — all the way to Malir.

Earlier, Hussain Mansoor —spokesperson for Sindh Senior Minister Sharjeel Inam Memon — told *Dawn* that the buses would run between Zainab Market in Saddar and Model Colony.

Stops were designated for double-decker buses along this route at/near Malir Halt, airport, Colony Gate, Natha Khan Bridge, Drigh Road, Nursery, Baloch Colony and the Finance and Trade Centre (FTC), he said.

Boarding the vehicle, one finds the lower deck reserved for women. Upstairs, a collection of men, children and a few whole families populate the two compartments — an enclosed cabin and an open-air space with a retractable canopy.

As children marvelled at the cars driving by below and most adults held up their phones to take photos or videos, the conductor came by to collect the fare — Rs80 for anyone stepping off before the Natha Khan bridge, and Rs120 for everyone traveling further.

After that, we were off, cruising along Karachi's main thoroughfare as the open canopy let in a cool breeze.

Seated next to me was Khurram, who usually gets around on a bike. Today, however, he was curious to see what the hype was about.

He said the new double-deckers were a significant improvement over local buses — known on the street as Mazdas. "The fare is reasonable, matching that of local Mazdas, but with a smoother ride and a better environment," he said.

While calling on the government to bring more such buses on the roads, Khurram said that it was the people's responsibility to take care of them.

Mohammad Ismail, a student who was riding with his friends, said the bus was nice, but the upper deck lacked straps for people to hold on to, should they need to stand while the bus is moving.

Ismail's friends, Akram and Mohammad Sharif, noted that the fare was higher than local buses. Sharif told me that for Rs50, one can get as far on a local bus as Rs80 will get you on the Peoples' Bus Service (PBS).

However, they quickly admitted that the new buses were far more comfortable, and devoid of "pickpockets", at least for now.

Ali Raza, who regularly commutes to work via bus, advised the authorities to extend the bus route from Malir Halt to Gulshan-i-Hadeed in line with the R-1 route of the PBS.

Shabana, who was travelling with her daughter, said she used to take a bus a long time ago, but could see the improvement in the quality of public transport in Karachi.

"We didn't have many facilities back in the day, but that's gotten better," she said, adding, "We have comfortable seats, the drivers cooperate with us, and the main thing is that it's not heavy on the pocket."

The pair were seated on the upper deck, so I asked whether they felt there should be more space designated for women. Shabana responded that she didn't really mind and found the journey comfortable and safe.

Habib, an office worker who drives usually himself to work, said he had lived in Dubai and found Karachi's new buses comparable to the mass transit system in the Gulf city. He said he and his colleagues would take the bus regularly if they didn't need to visit clients in different parts of the city.

"Quality-wise, I think everything is okay because it's just started. Let's see what will become of them after six months," he said. Recalling the local buses he had travelled on as a student, some 20 years ago, he said those were neither safe nor hygienic.

Mohammad Nasir, a regular PBS rider, said the double-deckers were better than other buses on the R-1 route because they had ample seating for passengers.

The smaller buses, he lamented, were usually packed to the brim, meaning that those in the back would always have to jostle to get to the door when they reached their stop.

In all, given Karachi's patchy history with public transportation, any additional services are bound to be welcomed by the populace. But with key projects, such as the Red Line along University Road, facing persistent delays, there is still a long way to go.

THE buses will run between Zainab Market in Saddar and Model Colony.—Fahim Siddiqi / White Star

Israeli PM provokes Tehran again as protests enter second week

- Rights groups claim at least 16 killed, hundreds arrested during first week of protests
- Tehran announces monthly allowance of $7 per person for four months to ease economic pressures

JERUSALEM/DUBAI: In a message meant to provoke the Tehran regime, Israeli PM Benjamin Netanyahu said on Sunday that his country stood in solidarity with the people of Iran, as protests over soaring inflation spread across several cities.

Rights groups estimate that at least 16 people have died during a week of violent clashes between demonstrators and security forces.

Deaths and arrests have been reported through the week both by state media and rights groups, though the figures differ. *Reuters* has not been able to independently verify the numbers.

"We stand in solidarity with the struggle of the Iranian people and with their aspirations for freedom, liberty and justice," Netanyahu said at the weekly cabinet meeting.

"It is very possible that we are standing at a moment when the Iranian people are taking their destiny into their own hands," he said, according to a statement from his office.

Netanyahu also addressed Tehran's nuclear programme, saying he discussed it with US President Donald Trump during his official visit this week.

"We reiterated our shared position of zero enrichment on the one hand, and the need, of course, to remove the 400 kilograms of enriched material from Iran and subject the sites to strict and genuine oversight," Netanyahu said, adding that the conversation took place at the outset of the "dramatic" demonstrations.

Monthly payment

Iranian authorities on Sunday announced they will give a monthly allowance to every citizen in the country to alleviate economic pressure, after a week of protests.

"Individuals can receive an amount equivalent to one million Tomans (approximately $7) per person per month, which is credited to their accounts for four months," government spokeswoman Fatemeh Mohajerani told state TV.

She said the amount will be given to every Iranian for four months in the form of credit that can be used to purchase certain goods and is intended to "reduce the economic pressure on the people." In Iran, which has a population of more than 85 million people, the minimum wage is roughly $100 (85 euros) and average monthly salaries are around $200.

Iranians mostly use mobile phones and debit cards for their daily purchases instead of cash.

PEOPLE drive past a billboard warning the US and Israel, in Tehran.—AFP

Speaking to state media, Iran's police chief Ahmad-Reza Radan said that security forces had been targeting protest leaders for arrest over the previous two days, saying "a big number of leaders on the virtual space have been detained".

The most intense clashes have been reported in western parts of Iran but there have also been protests and clashes between demonstrators and police in Tehran, in central areas, and in the southern Baluchistan province.

Speaking on Sunday, Vice President Mohammadreza Aref said the government acknowledged the country faced shortcomings while warning that some people were seeking to exploit the protests.

"We expect the youth not to fall into the trap of the enemies," Aref said in comments carried by state media.—Agencies

Turkiye offers to help facilitate Yemen talks

- STC welcomes Saudi call for dialogue as factions invited to meet in Riyadh
- Military official says '80 separatists killed in fighting
- Saudi-backed govt accuses separatists of cutting off Aden

ISTANBUL/ADEN/DUBAI: Turkiye is ready to help dialogue between Yemen's factions, President Recep Tayyip Erdogan told the Saudi crown prince in a phone call on Sunday, his office said.

A recent internal conflict in Yemen involves the Saudi-backed internationally recognised government and the separatist Southern Transitional Council (STC).

Erdogan told Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman during the phone call that Turkiye "is ready to contribute to efforts aimed at bringing parties together", according to his office.

Ankara is closely monitoring developments in both Yemen and Somalia, Erdogan said, adding that the preservation of the territorial integrity of the two countries was vital for regional stability.

The phone call comes a day after Saudi Arabia's foreign ministry called for Yemen's southern factions to attend a "dialogue" in Riyadh.

STC hails talks offer

The STC has welcomed a call for dialogue by Saudi Arabia to end the recent military escalation. The STC said in a statement on Saturday that the Saudi initiative was a "genuine opportunity for serious dialogue" that could safeguard "the aspirations of the southern people".

Tarek Saleh, a member of the Saudi-backed Yemen Presidential Council, met with Saudi Defence Minister Prince Khaled bin Salman and exchanged viewpoints on Yemen.

They discussed means to bolster joint efforts to support the stability of the country and the region's security, according to a post on X by the Yemeni official early Sunday.

'80 separatists killed'

At least 80 troops from STC have been killed in fighting with Saudi-backed forces and strikes since Friday, a military official from the group told *AFP* on Sunday.

Around 152 members of the STC forces were wounded and 130 were taken captive, the official said, giving a preliminary toll of casualties following the start of the operation.

SAUDI-BACKED forces are deployed in the city of Mukalla in Yemen's coastal Hadramout province.—AFP

Saudi-backed forces began on Friday operations to retake swathes of territory seized by the STC.

Most of the casualties had occurred in strikes by the Saudi-led coalition that targeted military camps held by the separatists, the official said, including Al-Khasha and Barshid military camps in Hadramout province.

'Cutting off access'

Yemen's government on Sunday also accused the separatists of cutting off the city of Aden and warned it would "take all necessary measures" after recapturing territory from them in the east on Saturday.

The government, in a statement from the presidential office to official media, said the STC had taken measures to restrict movement of citizens into Aden and that it had also received reports of a campaign of arrests in the city.

However, the separatists denied having restricted movement into Aden, but the government accusations indicate that hostility between the sides persists despite proposals for a dialogue that had raised hopes of a negotiated solution to the crisis.—Agencies

Thousands stranded across Europe as Greek airspace 'disrupted'

Moscow airports shut over Ukrainian drone threat

ATHENS/MOSCOW: Flights across Greece were grounded for several hours on Sunday after a collapse of radio frequencies crippled air traffic communication, stranding thousands of travellers and bringing airport operations to a virtual standstill.

There was little clarity on what caused the disruption, which began early Sunday and quickly escalated, affecting travel plans of thousands on the busy last weekend of the holiday period.

Some overflights across Greek and regional airspace were still being serviced, but restrictions were imposed on airport operations, Greece's civil aviation authority said.

By Sunday afternoon, limited services were restored after pilots switched to backup frequencies to keep in touch with controllers on the ground, authorities said. Greek authorities were still unsure of the cause of the blackout, which disrupted dozens of flights.

"For some reason all frequencies were suddenly lost .. We could not communicate with aircraft in the sky," Panagiotis Psarros, chair of the Association of Greek Air Traffic Controllers, told state broadcaster ERT.

The association later said the breakdown affected all frequencies used on the ground, and some frequencies used by Athens Approach, an air traffic control unit responsible for managing aircraft arriving in and departing from Athens's Eleftherios Venizelos airport.

The Air Traffic Controllers Association said controllers were using all means at their disposal to ensure the safety of flights, calling the scale of Sunday's incident "unprecedented and unacceptable" for an air traffic control system.

Psarros said the problem seemed to be a collapse of central radio frequency systems at the Athens and Macedonia area control systems, the largest air control facility in the country. It monitors the Athens Flight Information Region, a vast expanse of airspace under the control of Greek authorities.

"We haven't been informed about the cause of this problem... certainly the equipment we have is virtually ancient. We have raised this many times in the past," Psarros said.

Authorities had managed to raise to 45 the number of flights leaving Greek airports every hour, by late afternoon, a Greek official said.

Meanwhile, three out of four of Moscow's airports shut to air traffic on Sunday after Ukraine launched dozens of drones at the Russian capital, authorities said. The attacks led to multiple flight delays, including at Moscow's second-busiest airport of Vnukovo, Russian media reported.

Ukraine, which has itself endured waves of Russian drone strikes throughout the nearly four-year war, did not immediately comment. A spokesman for Russian aviation regulator Rosaviatsia announced the closures between 1300 GMT to 1400 GMT.

"The restrictions are necessary to ensure flight safety," Artem Korenyako said on Telegram. Each of the airports — Vnukovo, Domodedovo and Zhukovsky — partially re-opened less than an hour later, he said in later posts.—Agencies

France, UK conduct joint strikes against IS in Syria

LONDON: Britain and France on Sunday said they had carried out joint strikes on the militant Islamic State group in Syria to prevent the extremists from resurging.

France said it was part of Operation Inherent Resolve, a US-led international offensive against IS in Iraq, Syria and also Libya.

The British Ministry of Defence said it cooperated with France on Saturday night to strike an underground facility in Syria that had likely been used by the IS group to store weapons.

"Royal Air Force aircraft have completed successful strikes against Daesh in a joint operation with France," the ministry said in a statement, using the Arabic acronym for IS.

"This facility had been occupied by Daesh, most likely to store weapons and explosives. The area around the facility is devoid of any civilian habitation," the statement added.

The ministry said there was no indication the bombing north of the ancient site of Palmyra had posed any risk to civilians.

The French armed forces said in a statement on X that as part of Operation Inherent Resolve, the two "carried out strikes against positions of the terrorist group Islamic State". "Preventing the resurgence of Daesh is a major issue for the security of the region," it added.—AFP

Embattled Starmer vows to see out five-year term

LONDON: British Prime Minister Keir Starmer insisted in an interview on Sunday he will complete his five-year term amid speculation his centre-left Labour party could oust him after upcoming local elections.

Starmer, who won power in July 2024, also argued Britain should pursue further alignment with the EU single market, saying it was in the country's "national interest" to get "closer" to the bloc.

A decade after Britons voted narrowly to leave the EU, the stance is likely to draw criticism from Brexit advocates like Nigel Farage, whose hard-right Reform UK party has led in the polls for the past year.

The anti-immigration party is predicted to make big gains in local elections in Scotland, Wales and parts of England in May, and is on course to win the next general election due by August 2029.

In a lengthy *BBC* interview recorded on Saturday, Starmer warned Britain "will be torn apart in a toxic way" if Reform wins power, as he vowed to lead Labour into "the fight of our times" against Farage's "very right-wing proposition".

"I was elected in 2024 with a five-year mandate to change the country, and that's what I intend to do," he said.

Starmer — whose popularity has plunged to record lows during his 18-month tenure, according to polls — argued multiple leadership changes under his predecessor Conservatives caused "utter chaos".

"Nobody wants to go back to that. It's not in our national interest. We know from that evidence what happens if you go down that chaotic path, and I'm not going to take us back to that."

Parlous polling

But the British leader endured a torrid 2025, littered with policy U-turns, ministers resigning, and other self-inflicted crises.

Polls indicate Labour will perform poorly in May, prompting widespread speculation Labour MPs will move against him in the aftermath and install a new leader.

Starmer, who has made boosting economic growth his main target, argued achievements since taking office had been largely overlooked and that the UK will "turn a corner" in 2026.

He pointed to improving European Union ties as one of his government's successes, insisting relations "are in the best position they've been for 10 years".

London announced last month it will rejoin the bloc's popular Erasmus student exchange programme almost five years after leaving the scheme post-Brexit.

It has also forged closer ties with Brussels in other ways, including implementing alignment this year of its food and agriculture sectors with the EU single market.

While ruling out rejoining the EU's customs union or returning to freedom of movement, Starmer said Britain should continue to "get closer" to the bloc.

"I think it's in our national interest to go further," he added, noting single market alignment "needs to be considered on an issue-by-issue, sector-by-sector basis".—AFP

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